

Friendly Confessions by Rosy_el

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Summary:

Mike Wheeler was jealous.

Will and El and Mike had history homework to do; that's why they were at the Byers' in the first place. But then Will just had to suggest bringing Benny over and now neither of the two had touched their backpacks, instead, they were still laughing and crawling all over the floor.

"Well, I actually have to do homework, so I'm just going to head home," Mike announced bitterly, scrambling up from the couch and shoving his arms through each of his backpack straps.

1. Friendly Jealousy

Author's Note:

I'm planning on this being a three-part section of the series... soo... hold on for the mini-ride.

November, 1985

Mike Wheeler was pissed.

He sat slumped on the Byers' couch, arms crossed and face blank as he watched El and Will play with the dogs. Will held a dirty tennis ball in his hand and darted it up and down until Benny jumped up and caught a hold of it with his small, nonetheless sharp, as Mike had come to know, puppy teeth. "Oh, there you go!" Will cheered the black pup on, offering Eleven a red rope toy to encourage Benny. Will's dog, Clarence Odbody Byers (Will and Jonathan's favorite Christmas movie was *It's a Wonderful Life*), sniffed the much smaller puppy relentlessly.

El baited Benny with the new toy but the red rope caught old Clarence's eye too, spurring what could have been a tug-of-war between the two canines but was really just Clarence happily dragging an equally pleased Benny across the living room floor. Will and El threw their heads back in laughter, crawling around the coffee table to catch the dogs off-guard. Mike just stared at them, his dark eyes as flat as the line his mouth drew on his freckled face.

The itch had building up inside him since the time she came back home to Hawkins, a year ago now. Mike had yet to name the feeling—yet to even notice it for what it was really.

Mike Wheeler wasn't pissed.

Mike Wheeler was jealous.

Mike Wheeler was jealous when Dustin made El laugh so hard she choked on her milk the second day of school. He chewed his string cheese particularly hotly, jaw set and sneakered foot kicking at the

cafeteria tile.

He was jealous when Lucas took the lead in teaching her how to climb trees and monkey bars at the park over the summer. Mike's grip on the swing had gone white when El slipped and Lucas caught her. Well, when he broke her fall, more accurately.

Mike was jealous when Will and El passed notes in U.S. History. Will would doodle her and the teacher and even Mike with a faint scowl on his face and El would smile and write something slightly unintelligible back.

He was jealous when Nancy took El to the mall and said he couldn't tag along. *"It's called Girls Night Out for a reason, Mike. Can you guess what that reason could be?"* So he went to Dustin's and pressed the buttons on his Atari console a little too hard.

Mike was even jealous of a freaking dog, now. The way El kissed Benny's nose and how she doted on the little thing, bringing him everywhere she went. She hardly paid any attention to him, too busy cradling the Flat-Coated Retriever in her arms.

Will and El and Mike had history homework to do; that's why they were at the Byers' in the first place. But then Will just *had* to suggest bringing Benny over and now neither of the two had touched their backpacks, instead, they were still laughing and crawling all over the floor.

"Well, I actually have to *do* homework, so I'm just going to head home," Mike announced bitterly, scrambling up from the couch and shoving his arms through each of his backpack straps. Will waved the rope over Benny's head and El turned to look at Mike curiously, sensing the shift in his tone. Will's eyes followed. Mike marched for the front door and swung it open, determined to keep his feet moving and his gaze straight ahead. "See you guys later."

"Mi—" It was El. But Mike slammed the door on her voice and hopped on his bike without hesitation, peeling out onto the street heatedly, long legs slamming on the pedals. His hands and face and neck felt hot. He knew, way in the back of his brain, that he was being stupid and weird and *what the hell?* He didn't have any

ownership of El's attention! He was being possessive over a girl who probably didn't even see him as more than a nerdy friend. His neck grew hotter and he grit his teeth, cold November-Almost-December air whipping through his mop of black hair.

Will and El both jumped from their places sprawled out on the floor and raced for the window. Will spoke first. "What was that all about?"

El stared through the blinds. "I don't know," came her murmur. Eleven swallowed and picked at her sweater sleeve. "What's the time?"

Will walked a few feet and bent his neck to catch a glimpse of the time on the oven. 4:03 blinked in green. Will reported accordingly.

"I should get going, actually," She twisted her head from the window to throw Will an apologetic look. "I forgot my dad told me to do some stuff before I could hang out."

Will smiled at her and patted Clarence's back gently. "It's okay, El. I know."

El chewed her lip and shook her head, meeting Will's kind, knowing eyes. "You're right." She threw her backpack on and picked up Benny in her arms clumsily. "Friends don't lie."

Benny was still small enough to fit into El's bike basket, but it wouldn't be long before the dog would just have to resort to running alongside Eleven as she rode down the street. She biked slowly, her mind focused on keeping the pup from bouncing around. Benny licked at the wind.

Screeching up to the Wheeler house, El popped her kickstand and wrapped Benny up under her puff jacket, backpack still hanging from her shoulders. She made her way around the backyard and peered into the house through a window. She couldn't see anyone. Ted wasn't napping on the Lay-Z-Boy because he didn't get home from work until 6 and El couldn't spot Karen, either. Nancy was undoubtedly either studying in her room or hanging out with Steve or Jonathan. If "hanging out" was the right term for whatever it was

she did.

El grabbed onto the back door's knob and twisted, slipping in and heading straight for the basement, where she figured Mike would be.

"Hi, Ellie."

"Hi, Holly."

"He's in his room."

"Oh, okay."

El made her way up the staircase, one hand on the glossy wooden handrail and the other holding Benny on her hip. She came to Mike's door and peeked through the crack that left his bedroom exposed. She took the moment to study his room; science trophies and posters and stacks of novels and comics. His bed was messily made, blankets a little crooked and pillows thrown together haphazardly. El felt strangely flustered looking at the place where Mike slept and felt the need to force her eyes away. Her knuckles met his door softly.

Mike grumbled at the sound of the knock, his back facing the door as he sat slumped at his desk, homework strewn about. "I told you to leave me alone, Holly! I'll play Care Bears with you later." His dark head of hair hung lamely.

"It's me."

El's voice sent Mike jumping from his chair, cheeks ablaze and mouth stuttering. *Care Bears? Really, Mike?* He winced at himself. El pushed the door open and stood under the doorway. "What are you doing here?"

Benny poked his head out of Eleven's dark green jacket, a muffled whine disrupting Mike's thoughts. El watched the ground.

"Are you mad at me?" She inquired, voice nervous and uneasy.

Mike paused and then shook his head warily.

"Then why did you leave Will's house so mad?" She brought her

anxious eyes to his. Mike felt pinned to the wall under the heat of her stare.

He sighed and rubbed at his eyelids: an ineffective approach at buying himself time to think up some stupid excuse.

“Mike.”

Mike lifted his inky gaze to the beautiful girl in jeans and pink converse. Her hair curled slightly at her jaw and her eyes looked huge, planting a brick in Mike’s gut.

“It’s stupid.”

El sunk into a cross-legged position, Benny in her lap. She felt like saying something one of the boys would say, like “*No doubt*,” but the way Mike was acting didn’t feel like an appropriate time for jokes. She was still bad at social cues, however, incredibly in-tune with Mike’s emotions. “You can tell me.”

Mike studied the way her fingers glided softly and comfortably over the dog’s ears and he breathed carefully through his nose. He was at a total loss, navigating this situation. Mike liked El. He liked El a lot. And though he sensed there was something between them that El didn’t share with Dustin or Lucas or even Will, Mike Wheeler constantly second-guessed himself, insecurities and doubts creeping up his spine and into his brain.

“No. Screw you, Mike. You’re blind—blind because a girl’s not grossed out by you. But wake up, man. Wake the hell up!”

That had been Lucas, two years ago in the junk yard searching for the gate to the Upside Down. Things were totally and utterly different now, only 24 months later, but the stinging and the fear of rejection in Mike hadn’t changed.

He had no shot with *El Hopper*: her smooth pink lips and magic molten eyes and soft, lyrical laugh. Not to mention her endless courage and hypnotizing quietness and *superpowers*. Mike had it bad for a *potential addition to the X-Men*.

And he was Mike Wheeler: a scrawny nerd who had had the same

three friends since second grade, always got picked last in P.E., and spent most of his Saturdays carrying out ten-hour Dungeon and Dragons campaigns. The only reason El was friends with him in the first place was because he had stumbled on her in the rain. Luck.

It wasn't really luck, though.

"Mike?" Eleven's cool voice drew him out of his head.

He clambered for words. "I just haven't gotten to hang out with you that much since school started, that's all," a dull shrug twisted his body away from her.

"What do you mean? I see you every day!" El exclaimed, confused and grasping for understanding. But she was really just grasping for the Mike she knew. This wasn't him.

"I don't know!" Mike retorted sharply. Instant remorse spilled into his stomach and he softened his tone. "It just doesn't feel the same when we hang out, I guess. You don't..." his voice wandered off, his gaze stuck to the carpet. "Sometimes..." He breathed out heavily, clearly frustrated. "Sometimes it seems like you don't even know I'm there."

A thick silence blanketed the room. Mike faced the floor pointedly, cheeks fiery. El wasn't sure what to say; her lips parted and eyes careful.

Without thinking, she stood back up and slowly stepped toward him until she was just behind him, her jacket sleeve sliding against his bare forearm.

"Of course I know you're there."

Mike let out a breath and smirked jaggedly, shaking his head. El's chest burned at the way his hair fell into his eyes. She didn't understand most of the feelings her body associated with Mike Wheeler.

"I guess I shouldn't try to compete with a puppy." His crooked smile looked apologetic but dismal all at the same time.

Eleven's eyebrows pressed together. She frowned and looked from

Mike to Benny, who was falling asleep on the carpet. She watched him until Mike's words came together in her head; the past month or so, all her attention had been on the puppy, or at least that what Mike seemed to have naively thought.

She bit her lip, calculating her response. Then she reached out and hooked her finger into his. The tall boy froze and then complied to her gentle pull on his finger, turning him to face her. She refused to look at his face, unsure of what she would reveal and even then, not sure what there was *to* reveal. So she kept her eyes on his chest, which didn't help a whole lot.

Eleven drew him over to the dozing dog and brought him to a kneel on the carpet.

"He's pretty," El's fingertips met the dog's purely black paw. "Like nighttime." She swallowed and the words burnt her tongue. "He reminds me of you."

It was true. The rich darkness of both their features, those ebony eyes that seemed to look right through her. Mike's did that now as her face grew pink and her brown eyes flitted to his. Mike watched her gingerly, his brain hastily trying to assess the quiet confessions El was releasing.

"I'm sorry if I've been a bad friend—"

"No, I've been totally stupid lately, El," Mike kept his eyes tethered to hers. Actually, Mike couldn't seem to tear them away. "I'm sorry. *I've* been the bad friend."

Something in El strangely sunk to hear him say that. For the past year, El had asked herself if she was Mike Wheeler's *friend*—if she wanted to be. She thought back to when Holly had played *Snow White* for her and the prince and Snow had kissed and El suddenly realized all she had wanted to do was go back to that horrible night in 1983 just to have Mike's mouth on hers again. Friends didn't do that, though, she had come to learn.

And she really wanted to do exactly that.

“Mike?”

“Yeah?”

Her eyes found his again, a low glow igniting them.

Her voice came in pieces.

“I don’t think I want to be your friend.”

2. Jealousy Jane

Summary for the Chapter:

Little over a week had passed since El's confession in Mike's bedroom.

"I don't think I want to be your friend."

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm sorry this took awhile... the end of the semester is only a few weeks away and I had some major projects due this weekend! But here it is! :)

December, 1985

Jane Hopper was pissed.

"Where is Mike?"

They were clumped around the lunch table by 12:51, like usual. Release bell at 12:45. Six minutes to get lunch and sit down. Mike was nowhere in sight.

Dustin grumbled through his bologna sandwich. "Mrs. Fredrickson pulled Mike and Jenny Schneider aside after class. Probably gave them some *special project*." His tone was tilting toward bitter. Dustin was secretly (or not so secretly) hurt that *he* had not been selected to work with Mike.

El watched Dustin. "What does that mean?"

Lucas shrugged nonchalantly. "Means our Mike's a prodigy or some shit." He squinted skeptically at the milk carton in his hand. "This tastes funky. I bet it's spoiled."

"*What does that mean?*" She repeated, knees rigid and eyes alert.

"Spoiled milk?"

“Mike.”

Dustin and Lucas and Will all stared at her.

“Gosh, someone’s possessive,” Lucas smirked.

“My money’s on Mrs. Frederickson wanting to win the state science fair,” Dustin stuffed a Pringle into his mouth as he spoke. “Everyone knows Mike is the smartest freshman in the science department. Jenny Schneider is a sophomore and she’s wicked sharp, just behind Mike,” Dustin stated flatly, neglecting to vocalize his and Lucas’ positions as third and fourth best in science. El still looked lost, mouth hanging open and eyebrows pinched. Dustin sighed. “Only lower-classmen can compete in the Junior division. Mike and Jenny are lower-classmen. Mrs. Frederickson wants to win the Junior division. If we win, we could get more science funding for Hawkins. So she wants to make sure the top two students work together for the best shot at winning.”

Able to grasp the gist at that point, El swallowed and pointed her eyes down to her lunchbox. A tin Jean Gray stared back.

“So he can’t eat lunch anymore?” She asked softly.

“Don’t worry, El.” Lucas glanced slyly at the girl, the smirk still threatening his mouth. “He just might not get to eat with us as much, if they have to finish their project by... what, February?” He turned his head and aimed the question at Dustin, who nodded.

“February 14th.”

“Isn’t that Valentine’s Day?” Will inquired through a bite of apple.

Lucas scratched his chin. “I think so, it’s something like that.”

Eleven’s ears perked up at that. *Valentine’s Day*. She remembered her first Valentine’s Day way back at the beginning of that same year. Hopper had neglected to give her any heads up about the holiday and so the girl had been thrown into a curiously decorated town with curiously flustered citizens: red-faced men with bouquets of flowers and girls all dressed in pink and lace, hair carefully twisted and curled. Nancy mysteriously gave El the day off from tutoring sessions.

But El went to the Wheeler's anyway, where she was greeted with the Wheeler kitchen detailed with a fancy white table cloth, pale pink streamers, and heart-shaped meatloaf for dinner. El was thoroughly lost. Mike couldn't stop stuttering.

El hadn't understood why Mike had pulled her into the basement seconds before she had to leave to present a piece of folded cardstock and a box of square chocolates. El's confusion didn't stop her from eating half the chocolates on her way home, though, and finishing them before the next morning. Mike made sure the card wasn't too revealing at the risk of Jim finding it, he had simply written how happy he was to be El's friend and how he hoped it could stay that way for a long time.

El hadn't understood the gesture then.

But she was starting to.

"Yeah, apparently that was the only day that didn't screw with other school functions," Dustin concluded.

"But December just started. Why do they have to start now if the contest isn't until February?" El clicked her lunchbox open and starting fiddling with the tin-foil-packages inside, trying not to let her voice give her feelings away—whatever these feelings were in the first place.

El knew there was something different with Mike—the way she wanted to hold his hand and touch his freckles and capture his lightning-bug laughter in a bottle. It couldn't possibly be normal to want to bite someone's nose because they were so pretty when they smiled. Even El knew that.

She couldn't see what was going on in Mike's head though; if he felt any of the same things for her since she had disappeared and then come back to Hawkins. All she knew was that he had liked her enough to kiss her on November 12th, 1983. But two years had passed since that night. *I'm glad we're friends. I hope we stay friends for a long time.* The words scribbled on the Valentine's Day card crushed her now.

Mike was timid to display any of his undeniable affections for the same reasons, on top of avoiding all the merciless teasing from his friends. How could he expect El to reciprocate his feelings? Especially considering she had no prior experience with any boy; had never had a crush—never even seen another child before she broke out of Hawkins Lab. He had stolen her first kiss. The guilt chewed at him on the nights he stayed up far too late in the dark of his bedroom, thinking about her: nearly every night.

Little over a week had passed since El's confession in Mike's bedroom.

"I don't think I want to be your friend."

It had just spilled out. She wanted to grab at the words and stuff them in her pockets but it was too late. They were gone, floating in the inches between her and Mike.

And he had just gawked at her, face blank and mouth open.

"I have to go." She had panicked, snatching Benny and bolting for the stairs. Mike stared at the empty space that only seconds before had contained El. Then his brain caught up with her footfalls on the staircase.

"Wait, El!" He ran to his bedroom door but she slammed it shut from her place at the bottom of the stairs, wiping furiously at her nose as a drop of blood collected above her lip. *"El!"* Mike shook the knob frantically until the door flew open. He sprinted down the stairs by threes, tripping on the last set and catching himself hard on the wall. *"El?"* Mike raced out to the front yard. She was already gone.

It had been a week since then.

Mike had tried to catch El alone a dozen times. She still rode to and from school with him (on the days it wasn't too cold or icy to pedal) and sat at their table at lunch, but those were all times when they were with Dustin, Will, and Lucas, too. He'd fight to look unaffected—normal—around all of them. But he found himself staring at her even longer than he did normally and having to ask the guys to repeat themselves; he was too distracted replaying her words in his

bedroom over and over—an endless reel of film stuck in his head—to pay much attention to what any of his other friends had to say.

He'd tried to catch her on her way to and from class. She'd always slip away. She made a point to be nearly late for choir, too, never taking the seat he saved for her. He knocked on her door after school on three different days. No answer. He saw her blinds shuffle all three times—she was home. Mike knew she was home. But he also knew she was stubborn and determined; two things he typically loved about her, but now those same traits were infuriating him.

He had a million things he wanted to say to her. And she wouldn't let him.

Now, a little more than a week after that day of confession, Jane Hopper sat at a table, picking away at her orange peel while silently fuming over the idea of Mike's absence; off being mega-smart with some *wicked sharp* girl named *Jenny Schneider*.

Jane Hopper wasn't pissed.

Jane Hopper was jealous.

Jane Hopper was jealous when Jenny Schneider gave them all a ride home in her stupid white Pontiac and then went to the Wheeler's house afterward because she and Mike "had a lot of work to do." El nearly burned a hole in the back of Mike's head with her glare from her place in the backseat, squished between Will and Lucas.

Jane Hopper was jealous when Jenny Schneider stole Mike from the lunch table so they could have the science lab while no classes were using it.

Jane Hopper was jealous when *she* knocked on Mike's door, all alone, two weeks after her confession, only to have Holly answer and say: "Sorry, Ellie. Mike is playing with a new girl." El could hear Mike's voice echoing excitedly from the kitchen, Jenny Schneider's following after. She could see a flash of him—there in the kitchen, scribbling on diagrams and talking with his hands. El felt a sting in her throat and clenched her jaw, fisting her hands inside her green puff coat pockets.

"I'll tell him you came," Holly offered.

"No," El stepped backward off the top porch step. "Don't. I was never here, okay, Holly?"

Holly opened the door wider, her blue eyes startled and her light eyebrows scrunched. The motion drew Mike's gaze.

"Who's here, Holly?" He called, stepping away from the table littered in drawn out science project plans.

El gulped and stumbled off the second step, ducking out of Mike's line of vision. Or, at least, she tried to.

"El? El, is that you?" The papers fell from his hands and he rushed to the front door. His eyes caught hers as she stepped backward, putting more and more distance between them. She looked lost, almost. Dazed.

"I'm going to go." Her voice was eerily calm; her eyes were on his but not quite *there*.

"What? No, El," Mike shut the door hard and stepped toward her. "I've been trying to—"

"I'm going to go home now." El's eyes slipped to the concrete, her feet barely moving but moving nonetheless.

"Please don't!" Mike's voice rose sharply and he sucked in a breath. El's brown eyes shot back up to his nearly-black ones. "I've been trying to talk—"

She cut him off. "Did you replace me?"

"What?"

"Jenny. She's your new..." El stopped walking, "friend?"

"Jenny?" Mike squinted and turned his head at her, hair the color of coal brushing against his long eyelashes. El wanted to hug him and cry all at once. "What do you mean?"

Clarity suddenly sunk into his eyes.

“El,” he said the syllable like it was a snowflake on his fingertip, like it would melt if he breathed too hard. “Even if Jenny is my friend, it wouldn’t matter, she couldn’t replace you.” Mike took two steps closer. “Because you and me?” His pale skin was flushed. He’d neglected to get a jacket before running outside, his t-shirt leaving his arms exposed. “We aren’t friends.”

El’s lips parted, her forehead all pressed into her eyebrows.

Mike took another two steps, his hand wrapping boldly around hers. His fingers grazed over the veins on her wrist and then grazed down her palm, floating to her fingertips. She couldn’t bring herself to look at him, her eyes were searing into his smooth hand as it danced with her own. It took six seconds for El to realize she had stopped breathing.

“We aren’t friends?” El filled her lungs with barbed December air.

Mike’s other hand found El’s. His voice was strangely confident.

“Definitely not friends.”

Notes for the Chapter:

SO.... I'm thinking there will be a third part to this and though I have no concrete plan for it I have a few ideas floating around in my head. I'd love some inspiration though so PLEASE fill my inbox with your brilliance.

Can I go on a little rant? It's a happy rant, I promise. There are many, many reasons I'm so in love with the Duffer Brother's Stranger Things. But here are my top reasons:

We need to be seeing more characters like this, not just on television but in reality. Mike Wheeler willingly, and without question, takes a bald little girl stranger into his home after finding her out in a storm. He is so kind and so gentle and so good to this person he has never before met in his life. We need

people who are kind and gentle to the people around them, regardless of the situation.

And the moms and sons in this series. Holy cow I could go on forever. Jonathan pulls an extra shift to provide more money for his struggling family and is the sweetest, most patient and understanding person to Joyce, whose pain is, to me, unimaginable. That episode when Will's "body" is found and Jonathan is hugging Joyce and Mike is hugging Karen? FAMILY IS AMAZING and if you don't have a good family situation at home, know that there are people who love you and family is not confined to the blood running through your veins. I would love to be your internet sister and we can support each other and give each other another thing to be grateful for this Thanksgiving.

This is getting long so I'm sure I'll continue into my next post. THANK YOU FOR READING I LOVE AND APPRECIATE YOU ALL, genuinely.

-Quinn
(my real name :))

3. Not Friends

Summary for the Chapter:

“What the crap is going on with those two?” Lucas threw a skeptical look over his shoulder.

The three glanced backward. El was talking about something, too quietly for any of them to hear, and Mike was watching her mouth move intently, his white Nike sneakers alternating between being haphazardly close to tripping his other foot as he followed her every step.

Notes for the Chapter:

LOL I'm starting to hate coming up with titles, which is something I typically enjoy. Don't know why I felt the need to say that but there it is anyway.

December, 1985

“What the crap is going on with those two?” Lucas threw a skeptical look over his shoulder at the pair who walked slightly behind Will and Dustin and Lucas.

“What do you mean?” Dustin clumsily unwrapped a piece of bubblegum before popping the pink cube into his mouth and cramming the discarded paper wrapper deep into the front pocket of his jeans.

“What do I mean?” Lucas narrowed his eyes at Dustin. “Mike’s going to get taken out by a swinging locker if he doesn’t freaking look around. *That’s* what I mean.”

The three glanced backward. El was talking about something, too quietly for any of them to hear, and Mike was watching her mouth move intently, his white Nike sneakers alternating between being haphazardly close to tripping his other foot as he followed her every step.

“They’re sort of always like that,” Will shrugged as he offered Lucas the observation. “But something does seem different, I guess.”

El sensed two extra pairs of eyes on her, aside from Mike’s, and stopped talking. Her head lifted and she looked at Lucas and Dustin, whose heads flicked forward.

Lucas rubbed his mouth thoughtfully and Dustin snapped his bubblegum.

The faint hum of El’s voice returned to the background.

“We should look into this...” Lucas said decidedly, hands pressing against the door handles that led outside of the high school. He pushed the door open and started heading for the sidewalk. It was too icy to ride their bikes to and from school and they lived too close to catch a ride on a bus. So most days, they all just walked. “Will, you could talk to El, and Dustin and I,” he jabbed a thumb into Dustin’s coat sleeve and then pointed back at himself, “we can ask Mike about it.”

Will sniffed and rubbed at his cold nose. “Why do you want me to talk to El?”

“You guys do seem pretty close, Will,” Dustin spoke. “She’d probably open up to you about *feelings* the fastest—” his gum toppled out his mouth and when he tried to catch the pink wad in his palms, he only managed to step on top of it. “Aw, dammit,” the curly-haired boy grumbled, stopping to peel the sticky stuff away from the sole of his shoe.

“Feelings?” Will asked as he and Lucas stopped momentarily to let Dustin pick the gum away from his shoe and flick it onto the street. It also gave Mike and El a few seconds to catch up—seconds they weren’t really taking advantage of. Now Mike was going on about something and El couldn’t help but check up on his mouth every few moments. They were a good eight feet back. “Like, if she likes Mike?”

“Well, we already all know she likes Mike. Doesn’t take a genius to figure that one out,” Lucas gestured toward the distracted pair; Mike’s fingers were fumbling as he tried to help El connect the zipper

on her Everest-green coat. Both of their faces were blossoming red. They looked like Christmas packages.

“So if you already know she likes him, what exactly am I supposed to be asking?” Will pressed, his exasperated breath forming a thin cloud of white about his mouth.

Lucas kicked the toe of his shoe at a clump of hardened snow. “I don’t know! Just see *how much* she likes him, I guess. Just see what she has to say about it. I don’t get girls; I don’t get their *feelings*.”

“And you think that I do?” Will concluded, eyebrows knitted together apprehensively.

“Well, no,” Lucas huffed. “Gosh Will, I just think she’d be more willing to talk to you about it. You’re good with talking to people, El especially.”

It was true: Will and El had a friendship slightly unlike her friendship with the three other boys. They understood each other’s nightmares in a way even Mike couldn’t quite understand. Will knew things—had *lived* things, even after only a week in the Upside Down, that El had yet to weigh Mike with. The cold—that icy bitterness that ate at their ankles and necks and lips and all the gray, moldy murk that coated the twisted version of home. Will knew without Eleven needing to say it.

“Fine, I’ll ask El about it.” A chilled breeze swept through the early December afternoon. Will drew his jacket closer around himself. “Why does it matter so much to you anyway, Lucas?”

Lucas swallowed and shook his head warily. “I just don’t want to see Mike get hurt if El doesn’t, you know, feel the same about him. Mike doesn’t deserve more of that.” He cast another look over his shoulder. Dustin and Will’s eyes followed. “We’ve already seen what she can do to him.”

**

Will and El sat on the floor in the Byer’s living room, art supplies spread across the carpet. El had enrolled in Art Foundations after

seeing what Will could do with a piece of paper and a few crayons; even if she could only draw primitive versions of the masterpieces Will was constructing out of elementary-school-level materials, she was content. She had a simple perspectives assignment due the following week and El wasn't great with rulers. It was the perfect opportunity for Will to talk to her alone.

"Your assignment is to draw your name using perspective, right?" Will asked as he laid out a stack of freshly sharpened pencils. He had a bad habit of leaving his only pencil sharpener at school which left him sharpening all his pencils with a pocketknife; a trick Jonathan had often used during his own homework sessions in high school. Jonathan had never showed it to Will though, nervous that Will would nick his fingers. Jonathan was right to worry—Will had a few hairline scars on his knuckles and the sides of his fingers from the Swiss Army knife. It, however, didn't stop him from sharpening all his pencils—colored and plain old Number 2 alike.

El nodded, the movement of her head drawing a short lock of dark honey-colored hair into her eyes. She pulled a blue hairclip away from her head and secured the hair back out of her face, snapping the clip shut again.

"I always like to do a mini sketch on a separate piece of paper so I know what I'm aiming for the real thing to look like," Will explained, setting a practice sheet of paper onto the coffee table. They leaned over the table, perched on their knees. El watched quietly, elbows pressed to the tabletop, as Will sketched out a basic 3-D version of El's name. Eleven shook her head.

"Ms. Budd said 'El' is too short. I have to use Jane. Or Elle, with another 'l' and 'e', like on my birth... certificate."

"Certificate," Will corrected helpfully.

"Certificate," El copied. "But I chose Jane."

"Oh," Will flipped his pencil around and started erasing, but then shook out his hair impatiently and just drew a new sketch altogether. "There we go."

El smiled and laid the real paper she would be using for the project out flat, fingers lingering at the crisp white corners.

They got started, Will holding the ruler straight as El traced the lead tip down along the wooden rectangle's edge. Her forehead was all scrunched into her eyebrows, lips set in a straight, focused line. At some points, her tongue would peek out from the corner of her mouth as she attempted to hold the ruler straight on her own.

Will took the comfortable silence of her working as an opportunity to casually broach the "feelings" subject. He fiddled with an indigo-colored pencil, flipping it around between his timid fingers.

"So," he coughed, "how is school?"

El erased part of line she had drawn too long.

"Good."

Knowing her to be girl of few words, Will chewed the inside of his cheek and decided to be a little more bold, knowing the conversation wasn't going to go very far otherwise.

"How are the," Will coughed again, "uh, boys in your classes?"

"Boys?"

"Yeah, like, um," he struggled, scratching at the back of his neck. El didn't seem to notice her friend's discomfort, though. "There's a girl in my, um, human geography class and, um, I sort of like her a little bit; she's pretty and really nice..." His voice wandered but found its course again. "Do you have anyone like that?"

El gave Will a sideways glance, her brown eyes squinting. *Pretty and nice?* A nighttime mop of hair and a spattering of freckles floated to her mind. She directed her attention back at her project, to Will's immediate relief. He pulled on the collar of his sweater, which suddenly felt like it was choking him. He hadn't been planning on admitting any *feelings* himself. And Mike was much better and explaining things—concepts—to Eleven, like *liking someone*.

"El? Do you have a crush on anyone?"

“What is to have a crush?”

Will twisted his lips and tapped the edge of his indigo pencil on the table, pondering his response.

“Having a crush is when you really like someone else, more than a friend.”

El’s drawing came to a stop. “Not a friend?”

**

Lucas and Dustin and Mike sat in the Henderson dining room, science and algebra textbooks, homework sheets, scratch paper, and backup pencils all laid out on the table.

Mike punched numbers into his calculator and scribbled down equations as Lucas and Dustin shot uneasy looks at one another. Finally, Lucas broke the silence.

“So, how’s El?”

Mike fidgeted. “What are you talking about?” He kept his eyes rooted to the paper in front of his nose. “You should know; we see her every day.”

“How are *you* and *El*?” Dustin clarified, hands dutifully clasped atop his ignored spread of homework.

Blood crept up Mike’s neck and into the tips of his ears. “You guys are going to have to stop talking in code because I’ve got no clue what you mean be that.”

“Oh bull. I’m sure you’ve got a pretty good idea by what we mean.” Lucas said it sternly even though his faint smile looked smug.

Mike drew his top lip between his teeth and breathed roughly from his nose. He tossed his pencil out on to the table in front of him. “Just say whatever it is you want to say, Lucas. Don’t be so weird and cryptic about it.”

Lucas gave a somewhat satisfied look and leaned back against his

chair. “We know you like El. We just want to know what’s going on between you guys.”

“We know that he *likes* El?” Dustin snorted. “Mike practically drools whenever he sees her!”

“Hey, I do not!” Mike protested sharply, his entire head feeling suddenly hot.

“Yes you do!”

“Yeah, whatever! The *point is*,” Lucas hissed at Dustin, who promptly rolled his eyes, “we already know all that and we just want to know what’s really happening! Does she know?”

Mike straightened his textbook stubbornly. “About what?”

Dustin rolled his eyes again, the blue-green of his iris’s disappearing behind his eyelids momentarily. “About your drooling habit!”

“Okay, seriously?! I’ve never drooled—”

“*Mike!*” Lucas’ tone shut Dustin and Mike’s mouths. “We’re your friends, man. We want to know what’s going on. Does she know you like her?”

Mike’s dark eyes, so brown they were almost black, flickered between his two (present) best friends. “Sort of.”

**

“Yeah, not a friend. Having a crush is when you want to be more than a friend. You want that person to be your one special person, I guess. You belong to each other. You want to hang out with them like a friend but you also want to hold their hand and stuff.” The words were a jumble spilling out of Will’s mouth. He looked at El expectantly.

She blinked.

Then she looked back at her drawing and began to adjust her ruler for the next line: the right side of the ‘a’ in Jane.

“Mike isn’t my friend.”

Will’s fingers froze on the colored pencil he had been absentmindedly twirling back and forth.

“You and Mike aren’t friends?”

Eleven shook her head, a small smile pulling on the corner of her mouth. “Not friends.”

Well, I’m getting somewhere. Will glanced around the room, searching for what to say next.

“So you like Mike? You have a crush on him?”

A rosy tint bloomed along the bridge of the girl’s nose. “Does he have a crush on me?”

I’d hardly call it that, Will thought, hiding the knowing smile that was creeping up onto his face.

**

“Sort of?” Dustin and Lucas cried out in unison, abashed expressions painted on each boy’s face. The blush crawling on Mike’s face grew hotter.

“Well, we aren’t friends. That’s all I really know right now.”

“What does that even mean?”

“I don’t know, okay!” Mike spat, clearly agitated. “She told me she doesn’t want to be friends... she just doesn’t get the whole idea of liking someone, I guess. I don’t really know.” He rubbed his face with his palms.

“Why don’t you explain it to her, then?” Dustin asked.

Mike let his hands drop and a shrug lifted his shoulders. “I don’t want to force her into anything. Two years ago, she had never even seen another kid! She’s probably just confused—liking *me*, I mean.”

“What?” Lucas probed carefully.

A low sigh dispelled from Mike’s lips. “We’re all El really knows, right? Her feelings are probably just all confused. I rescued her from the woods, let her sleep in my basement, hell, I introduced her to Eggos! That was the first time anyone had ever treated her like she was... human.” His eyes fell to his hands. “I’m all she’s ever really known. Maybe I don’t want to clarify things for her because... because she’ll realize that she doesn’t like me like that. I can just pretend for a little longer until she figures things out and gets a crush on Jared Henson, or something.”

Lucas and Dustin stared at their friend.

“Okay, first: that was a little bit pathetic. I pity you right now, just a little bit,” Lucas remarked. “And second: are you crazy?” He slapped the table passionately and Mike’s head bobbed up in surprise. “El might have gotten a late start but that doesn’t mean she doesn’t know what’s up.” He threw a wild gesture at Mike’s textbook. “It’s *biology*!” Lucas smacked his lips pointedly.

Dustin laughed and nodded, his thick curls following the movement, “Besides, Mike, you might have been one of the first boys she ever met but that doesn’t mean you aren’t a great guy!” He patted Mike’s shoulder warmly, a smile spreading out his cheeks and reducing his eyes to two squints.

“The girl is *definitely* crushing on you, Mike,” Lucas concluded. His face grew slightly more serious. “Just don’t forget about us, alright?”

Mike smiled, his eyes downcast and his cheeks bright. “I’d never forget about my best friends.”

**

“You should ask him,” Will advised, resuming his twirling of the pencil.

“Ask Mike if he has a crush... on me?” She asked nervously, repositioning her ruler.

Will nodded, his soft brown hair bobbing up and down.

“But that sounds...” she searched for the word. “Scary.”

“No, it’s not scary—not with Mike. Just tell him how you feel.”

“I already did. Not friends.”

Will let out a laugh, imagining Mike’s face when El must have told him, to the extent her current vocabulary would allow, her feelings for him. “He knows already?”

**

The boys couldn’t manage to hold straight faces all week. Or at least, whenever Mike and El were together. The latter two didn’t notice much though, far too distracted by the other.

Notes for the Chapter:

So Mileven week starts today? I honestly didn't even know. Should I do it?

Author's Note:

I've never done a cliff-hanger before! LOL I'M SORRY.

COMMENT YOUR THOUGHTS, LEAVE A KUDOS IF YOU SO FEEL, THANK YOU FOR READING!